

Three Times by 49Times

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Summary:

Three times Joyce and Hop get intimate.

High school. Pre-series. Post-series.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

I tend to fall hard and fast for my ships and these two are no exception. There's so much chemistry and potential that I just had to.

I did blast through the series in a day, so forgive me if anything's inaccurate and feel free to correct it!

Cheers.

Growing up, Joyce never really knew him all that well. They lived in different parts of town, and didn't even go to the same school til high school came around. They had a few of the same classes, but they were never friends. Sure, she'd laugh along with the rest of him at the goofy, stupid shit he did at parties, or when he cracked a joke at one of their teachers, but they'd never really shared an intimate talk or anything.

It made sense. They ran in different circles. He was from the nicer side of town, an athlete with decent grades and an actual future if he wanted one. She was one of the poor kids, and hung around with the kind of guys who did just as much drinking and stupid shit as Hop and his buddies, but were far more likely to get in trouble for it because of their families' incomes.

Same school. Different worlds.

From the moment he hit his growth spurt, Hop was known as funny and charming, but Joyce has always suspected him of being kind of a jerk. The way he talks back to teachers, uses his athletic abilities to

get out of assignments, the way he spent sophomore and junior year pretty much screwing whatever girl would let him. All signs point to... jerk.

Getting partnered with him on a World History project in her senior year of high school only serves to prove her suspicions right.

He stands her up *twice* when they're supposed to meet in the library to work on the project. She sticks around for ages both times, but he never shows and barely apologizes after the first one.

After the second time, he walks up to her that same afternoon, where she's smoking behind the cafeteria.

No. He doesn't walk. It's more like *saunters*, casual as hell, tall and broad and sickeningly full of himself.

"Hey there, Camden," he grins, then nods at the cigarette in her mouth. "Can I bum a smoke?"

"Are you serious?" she asks, struggling not to let her jaw hang open in outraged disbelief. "You're a real shit, Hop."

"What?" he asks, almost pulling off genuine surprise. "What'd I do?"

"Really? That's two hours of my life I've wasted now waiting for you on this damn project," she grumbles.

“Ohhhh. Shit. Yeah. This morning. The library. Hey, I’m real sorry about that.” he mumbles, but he’s not nearly sheepish enough to satisfy her.

“No you’re not,” she glares.

He seems to realize she’s not about to be charmed and merely shrugs, giving up the act.

“What? Did I eat into your precious time spent with your dirtbag boyfriend?” he says. “Trust me, I did you a favor. Byers is a dick and a half.”

He’s not wrong.

“I know he is,” she mutters. She throws down her cigarette, stomps it out and lights another. “And he’s not my boyfriend.”

Hop lets out a dry laugh. “Not this week, maybe.”

She glares at him. It’s no secret that she and Lonnie are this fucked up, on again off again thing, but it’s not exactly a delight to be reminded that everyone else, even people she’s not even friends with, knows too.

“Sorry, Joyce,” he says, looking mildly more sincere. “He used to kick my ass in grade school, before I got tall. Any chance he got. Think

he'd still try if he only had the stones. Guess I'm still bitter about it. Really though, you *would* be better off if it stuck this time. Be rid of him once and for all."

She knows he's right, somewhere inside, but she also knows it's not gonna happen. She just gives a bitter shrug and hands him the cigarette she was about to take for herself.

"Here," she grunts.

"Thanks," Hop says, but she doesn't return the smile.

He takes it and leans up against the brick wall next to her. She lights another one for herself.

"Fucking relationships, right?" he says, a bit mumbly as he lights up the cigarette in his mouth. "If I'm being honest- that's why I haven't been around the last couple of times we were supposed to meet. Linda's been-a little difficult these days."

Joyce can't help but scoff. It's no secret that he and Linda were a thing for a while- by far the longest while Jim Hopper's been with anyone. It's also no secret that she tried to drop him a couple of weeks ago and he's been running after her like a kicked puppy ever since.

"How the tables turn," she smirks. "For once, it's the girl giving Jim Hopper the runaround. She still won't take you back, huh?"

He shakes his head. "Something about me not being mature enough. I don't know... She's probably right."

Joyce bites her lip as she takes in his glum expression. That seems a little unfair. From what she's heard, he's on track for police academy—which means out of Hawkins, which means he's got a goal, which means he's doing a lot better than most of the guys in their grade.

"Anyway, I'm sorry I ditched our meetings. She's got my head kind of a mess."

"Yeah, well," Joyce grunts. "I just wanna get it done, alright? You're past caring and I get that. You've already got your ticket out of here. Hop the Cop, right? That's what they're calling you. But me? I've got no delusions about getting out, Hop. I just wanna finish out the year having one teacher who doesn't think I'm a complete screw up. For some reason, Mr. Kashek actually seems to like me and I'd just... like to keep it that way, if can."

She says it all a little too fast and feels a little too raw when she's done.

He looks at her long and hard, this soul-searching gaze she's not really used to, one that makes her think there's more to him than meets the eye, like he might actually understand and sympathize. The eye-contact gets too hard to maintain. She looks away, takes a drag of her cigarette.

When she looks back, he says, "I really am sorry, Joyce. We'll set it up again and I'll be there. Really."

"Fine," she says. At this point, she'd be a moron to believe him, but

something in his manner makes her want to.

They finish their cigarettes in silence, but surprisingly it's not all that uncomfortable.

"Hey," she says, when he stubs his out. "You want another one? I really don't feel like going back inside."

He gives a small nod. "Yeah, I could smoke another," he says, but he's giving her this look that she doesn't really get, like he's really contemplating something though she has no idea what it could be. "Or..."

"Or what?"

"Or, we could just make out."

"*What ?*" she asks, half-laughing in surprise.

"Yeah," he says, getting up off the wall and turning so he's facing her. She tries to take a step back, but can't because her back's already against it. Instead she just looks up into his- *really good-looking* - face in disbelief. "Why not? We're bored. You're pissed at Lonnie, I'm pissed at Linda. Makes sense."

She shakes her head, "Yeah, Hop. And did you forget the part where I'm pissed at *you* as well?"

“Uh, yeah,” he says almost impatiently. “That’s what makes it *fun*, Camden. Angry make outs are the best make outs.”

“You’ve got issues,” she says. “More than I realized.”

“That’s not a no I’m hearing,” he grins, stepping a little closer. He looms over her, and she puts a hand on his chest. But she’s not pushing him. It’s just there. She *should* push him. The only times she’s made out with anyone other than Lonnie have been when she’s had several beers in her at some party or another. She’s never done it sober, in the harsh light of day and she’s never done it with anyone remotely like Jim Hopper.

“Hop,” she says and she still can’t bring herself to shove him away.

“I’m giving you five seconds to say no. Then I’m going for it. Five,” he says, and brings his mouth down lower. “Four. Three. Two. One.”

His mouth is centimeters away from hers, paused, and he smells good- *really good*- and different than Lonnie. Maybe because he can afford cologne that’s better than that shit Lonnie wears. But maybe-maybe it’s not even cologne, but something else that’s distinctly him.

She still hasn’t said or done anything to dissuade him.

“Zero,” he says, and she feels his breath on her lips. “Give me

something to go on here, Camden..." he says, poking at her hip bone with a large thumb before resting his whole hand on her waist. "Negative one."

And then his mouth is on hers and she's kissing him back in an instant. It's rough and clumsy. There's a lot of fumbling and groping. His hands are *everywhere*, and hers are clutching at his back, and he's - he's *way* more ravenous at this than Lonnie ever is but she's kind of okay with it. More than okay. Just when she's starting to think maybe she should probably wrap her legs around him, to better deal with this height difference, the door of the kitchen slams open, and they jump apart.

"What in heaven are you kids doing back here?" cries the curly-haired lunch lady, shaking a full garbage bag at them.

"Shit," Hop laughs, taking her by the hand and giving her a sharp tug. "Let's go."

"Is that smoke I smell, too?" the lunch lady continues, livid as Hop pulls her along the side of the building. "I know your mother, Jim Hopper, and you better believe I'll be having words with her about-"

The lunch lady's screams of outrage die out as they run around a corner, but they know she's still yelling up a storm. They run a bit further until they're sure she's not gonna come waddling after them and then slow to a walk, both laughing.

"Well. That was dumb..." she says, but she's smiling.

“Yeah,” he grins. “I guess it was. Fun though. As promised.”

They look at each other for a moment, breathless and still smiley. Then he softens. “Well, listen, Joyce. I gotta go, but are you free during sixth tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” she says.

“Alright. Meet me at the library. I’ll be there this time. I promise.”

And he keeps his word.

They don’t talk about the kiss and after the first few minutes of awkwardness, it’s like it never happened. They get the project done and go back to never really talking, though he always has a 'hey' and a smile for her in the halls. As predicted, she’s back with Lonnie in a week, and spends the rest of the year on and off with him, hating him more often than not but unable to cut him loose for good because of her stupid, messed up head. Hop gets Linda back after about a month and they spend the rest of the year together, and apparently head off together after graduation too, chasing the opportunities the big city has to offer.

She stays in Hawkins, stays with Lonnie, and not long after, Jonathan is born. Despite all the money troubles and what a shit Lonnie can be, she’s got some real joy in her days as she watches him grow.

The next time she sees Hop is a few years later when he and Linda

come back to town to tie the knot. She and Lonnie aren't invited, obviously, but it's the talk about town. Hop's working his way up through the force in Indianapolis, and Linda's got some corporate job too. They might be pretty average for a city couple, but they're miles ahead of most Hawkins couples their age, and the wedding's one of the nicer ones the town has seen in a while.

She spots him at the gas station when she's filling up her tank. He looks good.

She doesn't get his attention, and he doesn't notice her. Soon enough the newlyweds are out of town again and back to their city jobs and he's out of her thoughts again.

She next sees him several years after that, when he comes home for his mother's funeral. He and Linda come into the shop, Hop stumbling around in a bit of a daze, dropping stuff into the basket, Linda with their baby in her arms.

"Hop," she says, when he gets to her register. "Hi." She gives him a soft smile.

He blinks at her for a moment, and she can see he's shattered about his mom, sees how tired he is in the eyes. "Joyce," he says. "Joyce Camden. Sorry. I guess that's Joyce Byers now." She's sees a slight flicker of distaste at 'Byers' but ignores it.

"I'm- I'm so sorry about your mom, Hop" she says. "The whole town is. She was a really kind lady."

Joyce didn't really know her, but Ada Hopper did seem like a good woman, always involved in some community fundraiser or another.

The turnout for the funeral had been huge.

“Thanks,” he nods, and she can tell he’s just barely holding back his emotions, so she starts ringing him up as fast as she can, not wanting to keep him when he’s clearly going through hell. She’d lost her parents years before, but still remembers the pain and still carries it now.

“How’ve you been, Joyce?” he asks.

“Me? Oh, I’m fine. Yeah,” she says. “Same old, same old. You know. Linda, hi,” she adds when Linda comes up with the baby and a couple of extra items. “And who’s this beauty?”

“That’d be my Sarah,” Hop says, and he reaches out to grab a pink-socked foot in his large hand, tugging at it. “The love of both our lives.” She feels a slight pang as she watches because she’s never seen Lonnie look at either one of her sweet boys with that much love in his eyes.

“She’s an angel,” Joyce says, touching the baby’s soft hand for a brief moment before she finishes ringing them up.

“Thanks,” Linda smiles at her and they both notice Hop fumbling around for his wallet.

“Shit,” he mumbles. “Must’ve left it in the car. God, I’m a mess.”

Linda pats his arm, sympathetic and affectionate. "It's okay, baby. I got it." She passes him Sarah, who stretches out her arms to her dad with a mostly toothless smile. He hugs her to his broad chest as Linda pays up.

Joyce wishes them well and they head out.

The next time he comes back, it's alone and it's for good.

2. Chapter 2

Joyce only agrees to go to the bar because it's Doris from work's birthday, and all day at the shop she was looking low and lonely. The poor girl doesn't have a whole lot of people to celebrate with, and with both boys away for the night, she has no real excuse not to go. It's been longer than she can remember since she's set foot inside one, except for the several times she'd had to storm into one local dive or another to drag Lonnie out in time to make it to one of the kids' events.

There must have been a time, before the boys were born, where some part of her brain had thought bars were fun. That part's either dead, or too deeply buried for her to ever access again, so all she can do is indulgently sip a drink in the noisy dive, while her younger co-worker gets drunk enough to not feel so low.

When Doris has had enough that she's found her confidence, as well as a seat beside a moderately attractive young biker, Joyce slips into a booth in the back and into her own world, tuning out much of the music and noise, though not, unfortunately, the smells.

She's sitting there alone when he takes it upon himself to insert himself into her night.

"Joyce Byers," he says, startling her from her reverie and sliding into the booth beside her. "I always thought if chain-smoking was an Olympic sport, you'd be the girl to put Hawkins on the map. Still haven't kicked the habit I see."

Jim Hopper.

He reaches out and taps the cigarette in her mouth with one finger, and she flinches. She's seen him around plenty since he came back into town, but never up so close. They've given each other a polite nod now and then, when they've passed each other in the dairy aisle

or on the sidewalk, but she can't recall them actually speaking.

"No," she says.

He smells of booze, though rumor has it that's hardly out of the ordinary. Not that she can fault him for it, obnoxious though he still clearly is. She's heard the reason he's back, and it's no rumor. She's certain if anything like that ever happened to one of her boys, she'd lay down and never get up. He can get as drunk as he wants, as far as she's concerned. She's just surprised he's choosing to be it around her. She tries to shrug casually. "Don't suppose I ever will."

"Share one with me? For old time's sake?"

"Old times? Hop, it was only ever one time. Twenty years ago," She's surprised he even remembers. She feels heat in her cheeks at the memory of what came after.

He shrugs and holds out an expectant hand, cocky as anything. "And you let me dangle for a while then too, but you didn't let me down." The way he says it, she's not convinced he's only talking about the cigarette.

"Fine," she relents, and lights him up, trying to focus on the flame and not the intensity of his eye contact.

"Don't see you out on the town much these days," he says, side-eyeing her and leaning back into the booth. Completely comfortable. She trades the cigarette in her mouth for another swig of her drink.

“Yeah, well. I’ve got two boys to support. Doesn’t leave a lot of time for much else,” she says. She knows she’s being stiff, but she only ever talks to men who come into the shop. She knows what kind of man Hop is. She doesn’t talk to men like him.

“I hear that,” he says, raising his glass to her and taking a sip.

She doesn’t say anything. Even if she wanted to engage...it’s not like they were ever friends, with a whirlwind of stories to catch up on. They ran in different circles, did different things, and all of that was so long ago.

“Well,” he says. “You still haven’t warmed up much since high school. Guess I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“What do you want, Hop?” she asks, turning to face him better in the booth irritated.

“Jesus, you’re a tough nut to crack,” he says, arms raised in supplication. “Saw you sitting here by your lonesome is all. Thought I’d say hello.”

“And bum a cigarette,” Joyce says dryly. “Which you’ve now done. So-”

They’re interrupted by a loud squealing and look up to see Doris

flailing backwards off a bar stool. The biker beside her catches her just in time, and they both erupt into loud laughter.

“Somebody get this woman another shot!” the biker cries out, slamming down an empty pint glass with his free hand. Doris gives a whoop of approval.

“Well,” Joyce mutters. “There goes my ride home.”

Hop turns to her, expression sly. “I’ll give you a ride home, Joyce.”

She narrows her eyes at him, giving his nearly-drained whisky a pointed look. “You’re driving?”

“What, this? It’s only drink number two, baby. I’m sure you know the drill. These days, that basically equates with a glass of water. I’m fine to drive. Although...” he says, leaning in close. “I haven’t exactly had my fill for the night. If I take you, you’ll have to invite me in for a nightcap. As thanks.”

She meets his eyes, sees the lustful, dark look in them. She may only have experience with one subpar man, but she’s no fool. She knows what he’s asking. She knows the reputation he’s built up since getting back here. She knows how quickly he works once he’s decided to go for something.

She glances around the bar. It’s not packed, but it’s not empty. His tragedy and sorrow may have aged him a bit, but he’s just as good-

looking as he ever was, maybe even more so, and he still knows how to work his charms as smoothly as he ever did.

He's going home with some woman tonight.

It might as well be her.

"Fine," she says, and finishes the rest of her drink in one gulp. "Let's go."

His eyebrows raise briefly in surprise, like he can't believe that actually worked.

Neither can she, honestly, but she's been alone since Lonnie left, and was pretty alone even when he was still there. She works almost all the time and it's a rare night that both her boys are out at once. Jonathan's away at some statewide photography thing and Will's off on a campaign into some world that exists only in his head and the Wheeler's basement. Her opportunities are rare and if she doesn't take this one, who knows when the next will come along?

She keeps her back to him as she walks out of the bar, not wanting him to see how hot her face is. She's made a decision she's okay with, but there's still a mixture of shame and excitement that has her heart beating a little too fast in her chest as she walks.

She's grateful he doesn't try to talk too much throughout the car ride, content to blast the radio and croon along in a way that's not exactly

in tune, but not unpleasant either. It'd almost be relaxing, if she were in any way capable of relaxing right now. She finds a flask under the passenger seat and takes a swig of it.

"Help yourself," is all he says. She can hear the smirk in his voice, but keeps her eyes on the road ahead so she doesn't have to see it.

It's not long after stepping inside that they get to it. Neither of them has any delusions about what this is about. She pours them each a drink that they down quickly, and then he shoves their empty glasses out of the way and hoists her onto the counter with ease. A wise move, given their height difference. He knows what he's doing. Half a second later, his mouth is on hers, hands tangled in her hair.

He kisses her with more force than that fumbling kiss all those years ago, and his stubble scratches her chin, but she likes it. It's been so long since anyone's touched her and she moans into it, embarrassingly. He half-laughs into her mouth.

"Shut up," she mutters, bites his lower lip in annoyance.

It's not much of a punishment though. She suspects he's probably more than into sort of thing. He presses himself further between her legs and she feels his hardness grinding against her. The friction is lovely, but it's not enough. She'd gone to the bar straight from work, and these works clothes don't provide nearly enough access. His hands rubs at her cunt through jeans, but she wants more than that. He's so big and *broad* and she wants to feel his skin on her skin. Still, she's hardly going to strip down in the kitchen where her wonderful son cooked breakfast just that morning.

“Bedroom,” she says, and he carries her there, her legs wrapped around him. The halls are dark, and he bashes her against the walls a couple of times in his haste, but between all the frantic kissing, she can hardly bring herself to care. He finds his way though, with surprising ease, and throws the door open.

“That didn’t cause you much trouble,” she can’t help but say, raising her eyebrows at him as she flicks on a light.

“Call it a combination of practice and instinct,” he says, kicking off his boots and advancing on her. She steps back towards the bed and they fall onto it together, pulling clothes off and throwing them aside.

“Speaking of practice,” he says, between kisses on her jaw and neck. Deft hands are dealing with her pants and she leans up so he can wiggle them down past her thighs. “With you not getting out too much, I gotta wonder-” he says, pulling down her panties and running his fingers along her cunt, which is already dripping for him. “You gotten much action since that dirtbag husband skipped town?”

She pulls back, aghast. “You’re so goddamn rude, Hop!” She’s furious, but his hand’s slipped inside her and is doing things to her Lonnie never could, or never cared to, and she can’t help gasping and bucking against him. The smug look, the glint in his eyes- she hates him for it, but she knows they’re only adding to the pleasure in her cunt. It’s nice to feel *something*, even if it is deeply offended. What was it he said to her all those years ago? Angry make outs are more fun? Maybe the same went for sex. She wouldn’t know. When she and Lonnie were angry, they couldn’t even be in the same room together, let alone think about fucking.

"I know I'm rude," he says, nipping at her earlobe and making her shudder. "Still doesn't answer my question."

"You hardly deserve one," she says, even as she settles back more properly on the bed, lets him pull her panties over her ankles and toss them aside, let's him climb on top of her with a hungry mouth and hands that explore in a way that's as rough and gruff as he is.

"Maybe not," he says, still working at her body. His clothes are gone now too, and she lets her fingertips dig at his strong, broad back. "But what's the harm? I'm not here to judge."

"You're not here to talk either," she mutters and he laughs right into her ear, genuinely amused.

"I'm just curious," he needles.

"I don't really see why it's relevant," she says through gritted teeth, because she's angry, and also because he's still pumping at her cunt in a way that's making her turn to jelly, and she can't channel the anger the way she wants to. "But no- I haven't."

"Shit," he whistles into her hair, kissing her temple. "You know, I never expected I'd be cashing in on that behind-the-cafeteria thing twenty years later. It musta been some kiss."

"I see," she mutters. "You're not here to judge- just to inflate your own ego. Don't flatter yourself, Hop."

“Too late,” he says. “You might be loathe to say it, darlin’ but this says it all,” he whispers in her ear, pressing hard on her clit. There’s no stopping the moan he elicits.

“God, you’re an asshole,” she says.

“Yeah. I know,” he says, slipping himself inside her. She has to applaud his ability to multi-task, because along with working her cunt and shit-talking up a storm, he’s also managed to get a rubber on. She groans as he pushes past her walls. She’d grazed it with a few fumbling touches, felt it pressing against her during their frantic storm of kisses, but she didn’t quite get the sense of his size until he’d entered her. She feels full like she hasn’t in a long time (ever) and pulls him down into her.

It’s quick and dirty after that. He finally shuts up and the only noises from him are grunts as he thrusts into her, fast and hard as soon as he realizes how okay with that she is. It doesn’t last particularly long, but she orgasms, and she can count the number of times Lonnie pulled that off on one hand. When they’ve both come, he collapses at her side, breathing heavy. She’s also spent and is content to just lie there for a bit, taking it all in.

As her heart rate slows back to normal, sense starts to kick in and she gives him a nudge.

“Hop,” she says.

“Hmm?” he grunts and she can tell he still hasn’t quite recovered from the exertion.

“It’s probably best you don’t spend the night,” she says, giving him another firm shove.

He turns to her, surprised. “You know, I always say that but women usually have a tendency not to agree. I suppose they’re hoping for another round with-”

“Hop,” she says sharply, stopping him before he can go on tooting his own horn. She’s half-lying on his flannel shirt, so she grabs it out from under her and throws it at him. “You can go now.”

“Alright, alright,” he says, getting to his feet and dressing. He keeps his eyes on her the whole time he does though, and they burn through her, his expression hard to read. She feels them on her naked breasts, but even though he’s had his hands- and mouth- all over them, his eyes drinking them in after the fact is infinitely more embarrassing.

Still, she resists her urge to pull the sheets up over them, stares back at him, exposed and defiant. That seems to amuse him more than anything. He’s so fucking smug as he grins at her, “Well, Joyce. It’s been a real pleasure catching up with you.”

“Out,” she hisses, pointing at the door.

“Goodnight, Joyce,” he says, smirking.

“Goodnight!” she shouts, but he’s already got his back to her and walks out of the room.

He comes into the shop a few times after that. The knowing smirks and dropped innuendos tell her that if she ever wanted to call him for another round, he'd be more than up for it. But she doesn't. It's beyond rare for her to get a night where both of her boys aren't home, and she's hardly going to stay out and leave them home alone. She feels guilty enough doing that because of work.

Besides- he may be good at what he does, but it's a bad idea. *He's* a bad idea.

For a long time, she doesn't call. When she finally does, it's at work, and it's because the most precious thing to her on the planet didn't make it home to his bed. When she calls, it's because her world is falling to pieces and a grieving, pill-addicted alcoholic police chief is the person in the best position to help her.

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks for reading! Let me know what you thought of it! <3

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you so much for the kind feedback! Here you have it- the last and fluffiest chapter!

It's Christmas night, and after an excited morning of opening presents and a quiet dinner together, the boys have made their exit to the Wheelers; Will for junk food, video games and talks of wizards and elves, Jonathan to hang out with Nancy and Steve like the sweet, confused masochist he is these days.

They both looked vaguely guilty as they asked her permission to go. They know how much she loves Christmas. But Joyce did her best to give them a giant smile and a shove out the door, and really did smile as she listened to them chattering on their way to the car, albeit a more bittersweet one once their backs were to her.

They're growing up, and that's a good thing. The possibility that she could have very well lost them both is never far from her mind, and she forces herself to see each day as the blessing it is. She thinks of Will, in spite of all he went through, laughing his head off in the Wheelers' basement as they vanquish one beast or another, and it fills her with so much warmth, it really does. Still, when she waves them off and retreats from the cold into a quiet house, there's no denying that twinge of sadness at the knowledge that they stopped being her little boys a long time ago.

She turns on some soft music to help with the silence and goes about washing up the dishes. The wrapping paper is still strewn all around the tree, but she'll leave that for a few days- a reminder of her sons' smiles and the warmth Christmas brings.

She scrubs a slightly burnt pan, humming along to the music, but jumps and drops a mug into the sink when she hears a knock at the door, breaking off the handle in the process. "Damn it," she mutters, heading for the door and wondering who it could be.

If one of the boys had forgotten something, they'd surely just walk

right in and get it.

“Hop,” she says in surprise, when she opens the door and finds him standing in the doorway in a light snow that’s beginning to fall.

“Joyce,” he says, giving her a small grin.

“What are you- is everything okay?” she asks in a rush, her heart rate quickening because it’s late and she’s become programmed to worry more than ever with all that’s happened.

“What?” he blinks a little blearily. “Oh, yeah. Everything’s fine. I... you invited me?”

He looks a bit awkward about it, shoulders hunched and snowflakes in his hair. She sags with relief.

He’s been drinking. She can hear it in the slight slur in his voice, and smell it on him as he half steps into the doorway. His jacket’s far too light and he’s clearly cold, but she’s still too surprised to step back and let him in.

“For Christmas dinner,” she says. “At- at five o’clock.” She raises an eyebrow at him and he looks sheepish.

“Uh, yeah. Uh, what time is it now?”

"It's after ten," she says, shaking her head.

"Oh," he mutters. "Shit. Well, I can go if..." he says, trailing off when she grabs his jacket collar and pulls him in out of the cold. She frowns slightly once her back's to him.

She's seen quite a lot of him in the year since it all happened.

He came around pretty often right after Will got home from the hospital, to check on her and the boys help out with house repairs. He taught them how things were done, and taught her a couple of useful home maintenance things too. Not always with perfect patience of course, because he was Hop, but he'd always apologize if he got short with them, always make sure they understood what he was doing.

Even after everything was back to normal- or in better shape than it had ever been, if she was being honest- he still found excuses to come around, or she found excuses to invite him. He liked her boys, and they liked him, and he seemed to...just fit somehow.

All year, she's seen him make a real effort to cut down on the drinking, though not without bad weeks here and there. Clearly he's hit the bottle pretty hard tonight though, and she tries not to think about him driving with the roads being wet in this state.

But she's unsurprised that he'd struggle today of all days. Some of her strongest, most cherished memories are of Christmas days with her children. She knew it would be hard on him, how raw he still is about Sarah beneath the surface, and always will be. It was part of why she'd invited him.

"I'm sorry," he mutters. "To be so late. For not calling. I just- Christmases are hard. The trees, the lights, the presents. It's- it's impossible not to think of her. Some days are better than others, but Christmases- they're always shit. I didn't wanna wreck your day by bringing that- that part of me down on you and the boys. I just

couldn't-

"I get it, Hop," she says softly, a hand on his arm to stop his rush of unneeded excuses. "Jim," she corrects. Mostly she still calls him Hop, but this is a moment for first names. "I really do. No apology needed," she gives him a soft, warm smile. "So, what made you change your mind?"

He shrugs, looks at his feet for a moment before forcing himself to meet her eyes. "Got drunk," he shrugs. "Got... lonely."

Her chest constricts at the vulnerability she sees in his eyes. He's let his walls down around her about Sarah a couple of times, but she never quite gets used to it. "Well, I'm glad you came," she says and they start walking towards the kitchen. "The boys have just headed off to the Wheelers so I've got a bit of that going on myself."

"On Christmas?" he asks, surprised.

"Well- yeah. We were together all day. And it was lovely. But- they're growing up, Hop. I can't keep them tied here forever, as much as I might want to," she says, pausing in the doorway to answer his question.

She's been trying not to think about it, but she allows herself to feel the weight of that truth now that he's here, to acknowledge that she's sad and not alone in it.

They look at each other, and his expression is so understanding and raw that she wants to wrench her gaze away in fear, but he does it

first. He glances overhead, in the doorway to the kitchen.

“Hey,” he says, a sleepy, drunk half-smile on his face. “Mistletoe.”

“Oh,” she laughs, louder than necessary and all but charging past it into the kitchen. “Yeah. That’s all Will’s doing. Jennifer Hayes has been coming by to study these days. I think he’s set his hopes on getting in a kiss in before New Years. Like I said- growing up.”

Even drunk, Hop can’t have missed the way her eyes widened or how she abruptly moved the topic of conversation to her kids. Or the overly cheery tone of her voice. But- well- what does he expect- what was she supposed to-

“Oh yeah?” he laughs, following her into the kitchen. “How are his prospects lookin’?”

“Honestly?” she says, shaking her head. “A lot better than his poor brother’s right now.”

Hop winces. “Eeesh. He over third-wheeling it again tonight?”

She nods grimly.

“Shit. You know, he asked me about it, a while back. What he should do. Said he should either tell her how he feels or stay away. Stop tormenting himself like this. Even offered give him some pointers on

how to talk to other girls- told him there are probably tons of nice ones he hasn't chased monsters into alternate dimensions with that he might like if he gave it a chance. But he's only got eyes for Nancy Unavailable Wheeler. Completely uninterested," he says, shrugging.

Joyce laughs. "I'm not sure *I'm* interested in you giving my son advice on women either."

He's somewhere between wounded and amused at her accusation. "Hey now! First of all, your boy's a gentleman to the bone and nothing I could say would ever steer him away from that. Besides, even if I could- you know I wouldn't." It's more question than statement. There's a plea beneath the surface, a cry for validation.

She can give him that. He's been nothing but good to her boys.

"Yeah, Hop," she says, patting his arm. "I know. Listen, can I get you a drink?"

She knows it's probably best not to encourage him- but it is Christmas. Besides, she could use one herself to take the edge off.

Joyce never really knows exactly how to *be* around him anymore, or what this strange friendship really means. And it only seems to get harder with time. There's this closeness between them building up, but realistically, there's nowhere else for it to go. She's got this fear she can't shake, that if it builds up too high, it'll topple and all this warmth will crumble to rubble.

She's seen a lot of him throughout the year, but she hasn't spent much time alone with him since they got Will back. Usually when he's around, the boys are too, and Will easily fills any awkward silences that might come up with a million questions and stories and play-by-play recaps of some dungeon campaign or a new movie he's seen. John's there too, to quietly ask his opinion on things or show off his latest photos. Often, she's busy making dinner, or he's busy working on the house. There are distractions. Distractions are good.

In the rare moments they have been alone together, with nothing particular to do- she's felt the beginnings of little sparks she'd rather ignore, because to do otherwise would be terrifying and possibly disastrous.

He's no longer that barely-friend from high school or the man she took home on a whim, to discover whether or not she could enjoy meaningless sex (*I could*, she remembers. *I did*).

They've been through hell and back together, and they're *something* to each other now, but she knows it's better not to uncover exactly what it is.

Hop might be kind to her, and wonderful to her boys, but he's still damaged in a very real way, still more complicated than she knows how to deal with and still sleeping his way through half the town.

And moreover, there's something going *on* with him. Something she's never asked about, but she knows it has to do with *them*. Brenner and his people. Whatever it is, it's part of whatever deal he made that got her son back. She'll never stop being grateful to him for that, but she does worry about what it is they're making him do, what it is that has him looking so weary and run down all the time.

She doesn't ask what it is, and she won't until he's ready to tell her.

What she does know, is that more often than not he shows up looking like he has the weight of the world on his shoulders, a far away look in his tired eyes.

She also knows, that during the times that he joins them for one of her mediocre dinners and Will talks his head off and Jonathan quietly shows him his latest photography, Hop truly looks happier. He smiles and it reaches his eyes. He laughs and it rings out in a pleasant bark that fills the room. She's never felt particularly funny, but she can get him to laugh sometimes, and she likes that.

She knows that when he leaves her place after the boys have headed to bed, he looks lighter and calmer. And she knows that she's always sorry to see him go, and worried about the things he's getting into and the things he's holding inside and terrified he might get into the kind of trouble that keeps him from coming back to her.

There's affection between them, and there's no denying that at least on that one impulsive night there was attraction between them too. But they put that jar up on high a shelf when he walked out of her bedroom in the middle of the night and she's pretty sure that's where it ought to stay. She can't deny that she feels a charge, sometimes, when he looks at her in a certain way, but it's too dangerous to pursue. She'd be a fool to chase it and she finished being a fool when she finished with Lonnie.

He's not Lonnie though. She knows it a thousand ways, but the most prominent of them is the way Hop listens to the boys talk about what they like, and there's no judgment. Not even a bit.

Even when he doesn't quite get why rescuing imaginary princesses from a Tessawhatta is so important, even when he's not quite sensitive or introspective enough to have a clue about Jonathan's thought process when he photographed the faded road sign flailing about in the wind, he *wants* to understand, and tries to.

She also knows that when she watches them together, in those moments, more and more often she needs an excuse to leave the room to deal with the lump in her throat.

Dangerous thoughts, Joyce. Dangerous thoughts.

“Yeah,” he says. “A drink’d be good.”

She heats some eggnog on the stove, and he resumes their conversation, completely unaware of the dozens of insane thoughts battering about in her head. “So things are still going strong with her and the Harrington kid, eh?”

“Yeah. I wish he’d- he’d move on too. Or that Steve Goddamn Harrington would just...go somewhere far, far away,” she admitted.

“Hey now,” he says. “He’s turned into a pretty good kid, actually. Really cleaned up his act since everything that happened. Dropped the old crowd. Got his head screwed on right.”

“I know. I know. I’m not saying I want anything to- it’d just be so much easier on Jonathan if he- wasn’t around. Maybe then she’d be able to see my John for who he is. I know Steve’s a good kid. I just think... mine’s *better*,” she says with a guilty smile. Hop laughs.

“Maybe he’ll get his chance soon. Her and Steve- it’s a high school thing. Those don’t last forever,” Hop says.

“I suppose not. But it’s a small town. I mean- ours both lasted a pretty long time, didn’t they? With Linda and Lonnie? A lot longer than they should have, in my case,” she adds, trying to hold back her bitterness and not quite succeeding. She feels the ghost of a touch on her lower back, but then he drops his hand, and she finishes pouring the drinks.

“Besides,” Hopper adds. “It’s college soon. I hear he’s got his heart set on NYU. Soon enough he’ll be batting off cute New York girls who can’t wait to get their hands on a brooding artist type.”

“Don’t remind me,” Joyce groans, rubbing her temples. “I know he’s applied for about a thousand scholarships. I know he’s bound to get a few of them. And I’ve put away as much in savings as I can, as often as I can but I’m still-”

“Hey,” he says low, and soothing, and this time his touch on her back is solid. “It’ll all work out. I’ve seen his pictures. The kid’s got talent. They’d be insane not to take him. Anyway, it’s Christmas. Save your worrying for every other day of the year. Come on, let’s go sit.”

She obviously knows perfectly well where her own living room is, but she kind of likes the way he guides her to the couch anyway, the gentle but firm push of his hand against her back.

“So,” she says as gets on the couch and he settles in beside her, not quite touching but close enough that her shoulders tense for a moment. She could shift away, but he’d notice. And she’s not fourteen. She can handle sitting beside a man, even one who’s got that nice musk under the slight smell of whisky, one who makes her head spin with thoughts that shouldn’t even be in there. “Did you check in with the station? Any family drama blow itself out of proportion today? I hear holidays can be the worst in your profession.”

He gives a soft laugh and sips his eggnog. “It was surprisingly quiet, actually. Figures. I was on duty last Christmas and I had to hit up three domestic disputes within a few hours, the worst of them involving a brand new car that someone took a tire iron to—apparently because there was some disagreement over who should carve the turkey.”

“God,” Joyce cringes. “That’s awful.”

“Yep. But today was smooth enough. Sounds like the worst of it

involved some stolen Christmas decorations. Just kids. If I'm right- and I almost always am- it's the same little shits that always go after Phil Larson's gnomes. We'll probably find some crude scene of Santa humping a reindeer on the football field in the morning. Anyway, I told Callahan not to sweat it til tomorrow," he says, rolling his eyes.

Joyce laughs heartily at that, and he joins her, but when the laughter subsides, she's still smiling. She can't stop. She's only had a few sips of her eggnog, but it's warm in her belly and Hop warm at her side. The twinkling Christmas lights add to the warmth of the room. They sit in silence for a while, and she's just smiling.

Eventually, he starts to look a bit baffled, though he's giving her a slight grin too. "Joyce. You're smiling. Kind of ...a lot."

"I am? I guess I am," she shrugs. "I just- I wasn't expecting company, I suppose. I'm glad you stopped by, Hop. Even if it was just to provide horrible mental images of obscene Christmas ornaments."

"We don't have to leave it at mental images. Let me borrow that camera of your boy's and I'll bring you back proof of my theory," he grins.

"No thank you," she says, smiling into her cup.

They drink and chat. Eventually it's time to refill their eggnogs and by the time she comes back, she can see that the first one has started to hit him (on top of whatever else he had before getting here).

He's sitting up straight in his chair now, eyes glinting. He looks ready for something, but she doesn't know what it could be. But given that it's Hopper, she's fairly certain she won't have to wait long if he's got something on his mind.

She proceeds forward cautiously and hands him his mug.

"So," he says.

"So what?" she asks, suspicious, sitting down though she's not sure she should.

"Rumor has it you've been seeing someone," he says. She'd been prepared for something uncomfortable, but it still kind of blindsides her that he'd just come out with it like that. She's always known him as a blunt ass, but it still surprises her sometimes just how forward he can be.

She looks at her feet for a moment, flushed, but then looks at him again, forcing herself to meet him with as much bluntness as he's come at her with.

"Yes," she says. "I have. Though I wouldn't have pegged you for such a gossip."

"Have to be. Part of the job," he says with a shrug. He's been really soft with her and the boys lately, but there's still a smug bastard in there and she sees it now, plain as day. There's nothing to do but gear up to match wits with this side of him, now that he's determined to show it.

"Yeah? So the good taxpayers of Hawkins are paying you to snoop into who I eat with now?" she asks, brow raised, arms across her chest.

"Of course not. But I did hear it. I keep an ear to the ground, Joyce, on duty or off. I have to. For information that might be pertinent to the town."

"The town," she repeats, flatly. Then she shakes her head. "You

know, Hop, despite it being a lot busier than mine, I never pry for details about *your* love life, so I really think you ought to-”

“That’s your choice, isn’t it?” he says, nudging her with his shoulder. She almost drops her drink in surprise, and flushes at her own overreaction. “Besides, I wouldn’t exactly call what I’ve got a *love* life, if you know what I mean. I think 'sex life' would be a bit more appr-”

“You’re despicable,” she says, shaking her head, but he only grins.

After a moment though, he sobers and goes on, “Seriously, though. It’s this Chambers guy, is it? One who opened up the hardware store on Chestnut?”

It’s true.

He’d come into her shop a few times and though she has no idea why, Joyce caught his eye and he started getting pretty chatty with her. Edward Chambers, newest business owner in town, was a nice looking man and his attention to Joyce had the other shop girls in a tizzy.

Eventually he’d asked her to dinner, and though she’d turned him down at first, her coworkers had been appalled. Again and again they railed at her about Lonnie, about moving on, about letting someone in, about what a gentleman Ed was. Eventually they needled her into saying yes, mostly because they wouldn’t stop mentioning Lonnie and she couldn’t stand to hear his name.

She’s surprised it’s gotten back to Hopper already, and not sure what he hopes to accomplish by bringing it up.

“We’ve gone on a couple of dates, Hop. It’s not a big deal. Or any of your business,” she says. She really doesn’t want to be discussing it with him. She’s appalled by how rude he’s being.

“Couple of dates, huh? So, he didn’t get an invite to Christmas dinner?”

“God!” she cries in frustration at his persistence. “No, Hop. He’s- he’s with his sister and brother-in-law in Elmwood for the week. And- even if he wasn’t- who’s to say it’ll even work out? I’m not just going to bring some man around to spend the holidays with my boys when I’m not even sure-”

“I’m some man,” Hop says. His face is too close to hers, and she hates how low and husky his voice is, and the way the words make the hairs on her neck tingle.

“Yeah,” she says, rolling her eyes, refusing to let him get to her. “You are. One who is a piece of damn work.”

“I’m some man,” he repeats. “And I got an invite.” He’s teasing her, waggling his eyebrows.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Hop. Of course you did. The boys love you. You helped save their lives. But that’s- different. You’re- you and I- we’re not... *involved*.”

She looks away, embarrassed at her fumbling and how hard it is to look him in the eyes these days. When she looks back he doesn't appear quite so amused. His gaze is intense.

"Well, listen, alright? I'll drop it. I really will, but just- answer me this. This guy you're... *involved* with- is he treating you right?" he rubs awkwardly at the back of his neck. "Because- I remember what a dick Lonnie was in high school and- I know got back to Hawkins around the time that dirtbag was on his way out. I know I never answered the calls personally, but I remember officers getting called up here more than once towards the end. And I sure as hell ran into him in enough bars to know he-"

"Hop," she says, bristling now, though she feels the start of tears springing to her eyes too. "You're overstepping."

The warning in her voice is clear.

"Overstepping? Joyce, I'm only trying to look out for you. I- I've got no say in what you do or who you see. I know that. I just want to know that he's good to you," he says.

His voice is quiet and a little strained, his eyes, sincere. "You've got more strength for your boys than anyone I've ever seen, Joyce. It's incredible. It's just sometimes I'm not sure you keep enough for yourself. And- well, you deserve someone who's good to you is all I'm saying. You do."

She wants to be mad at him, for sticking his nose in her business, for being such an infuriating mix of obnoxious and sincere, but she finds she can't muster the anger she wants to. She's touched by his words.

She softens. "He's a nice man, Hop. And as I said, it's only been a couple of dates. He's been fine, and if he ever isn't, I can take care of myself," she says.

"I know that, Joyce. Know it for a damn fact," he nods, remembering himself. "God, I know it better than anyone. I'm sorry. I'm an idiot. I just- well, you know, if he ever isn't and need me to throw him in a cell or you know- make him disappear entirely, I'm here. Sorry," he says, still rubbing at the back of his neck. "Again."

"Thank you, Hop," she says, her lips twitching as she tries to stress that she does- in spite of her annoyance- appreciate his concern.

"Really. But I doubt that will ever be necessary."

She means it. Ed is...perfectly nice. But he invited her to a New Year's party over a week ago and she still hasn't given him an answer, even though there's no logical reason to say no.

"I'm such an idiot," Hop mutters, finishing his drink. "Sorry, Joyce."

She's definitely not going to refill it this time, but she does pat him on the arm reassuringly.

"Hop, you're fine. It's fine."

"Okay. Thanks. Sorry," he says again. She doesn't answer, but she allows their arms to touch on the couch, so he knows she really isn't

angry.

There's a silence between them, and in it she finds her thoughts spinning.

What exactly was this thing between them? His interest in her love life is a little baffling. Of course- they're friends and they can talk to each other about pretty much anything. And he knows enough about her past to have cause to question her taste in men. Still. Strange.

Has she let him in too far, really? Maybe it's time for her to take a step back, to reevaluate what the nature of their relationship is. She usually tries not to think about it, but there's no denying that her heart's been beating faster than usual since she opened the door to see him standing there, and that it usually is when he's around.

There are a million reasons why she shouldn't want him, why he'd be a impractical, even dangerous choice- but the fact of the matter is even though Ed Chambers is a sweet man who took her to two restaurants way outside her price-range and said nice things to her the whole time, she's never had as much fun with him as she does with Hop. When he fixes her porch and tells stories about the big city, or figures out what's going on with her toilet and argues with Will about why Jaws makes no sense, or even just sitting here beside him on the couch while he's being a drunken buffoon.

When Ed kissed her goodbye the other night, it had been nice, but there was none of that heat from the night she took Hop home from the bar, or even when she'd made out with him behind the cafeteria as an angry, fumbling teenager. And nothing close to the affection she feels for him now, her confusing friend, who checks in on her as often as he can and always manages to make her laugh when he does.

She's not sure what thoughts have been going through Hop's head during this silence, but chances are they've been as awkward as hers because he ends it, a bit too loudly, with "So it looks like the boys got a good haul this year. Lucky kids. You sure figure out how to spoil them."

His voice is a bit overly cheerful as he gestures at all the wrapping paper strewn beneath the tree, and she suddenly remembers how hard Christmases are for him and feels like an ass.

She gets an image of him sitting below the tree, watching a sweet little girl open up a wrapped bear with love in his eyes. He showed her a picture of Sarah just once, as she'd been right before she got sick. It's tattered and torn from being in his wallet, but intact enough that Joyce can see the smile and bright eyes so clearly in her mind's eye. So clearly that her heart shatters.

"Oh, God. Hop. I'm sorry. I should have- I know you don't want to be reminded of- Here, let me tidy this up-"

"Joyce," he says, putting a hand on her thigh to stop her from standing up. "It's fine. Please. Don't. Just sit. Sit with me."

"I- okay," she concedes, but even though she's given up trying to stand, his hand is still on her thigh.

"Hop..." she says, staring at it, unable not to.

“Oh. Sorry,” he says, embarrassed.

But just as he goes to pull it away, she realizes that she wants it there, that she wants *him* and she's tired of lying to herself about it.

In a fluid motion, she catches his wrist, leans up and catches his lips with hers, impulsive and hard and a little clumsy. She feels his surprise, and feels it melt away as he both softens and deepens the kiss, bringing a warm hand up to the back of her neck. His mouth is hot, his stubble is just as nice and gruff as it ever was. She's enjoying every bit of it- too much probably- and thinks she could happily do this forever- but after a moment she forces herself to pull back a bit, to break away from the hands that are tangled so perfectly in her hair.

She's the one who sprung this on him. She ought to give him a chance to- to think about. Hell, she probably needs to think about it herself.

“Wow,” he says, voice husky and low. “I won't pretend that I remember that cafeteria one real well...or most of the ones from that other night- but...I'm pretty sure that was our best kiss yet.”

He's grinning at her and she flushes.

“You oughta make the first move more often, Joyce.”

“I- I’m not sure what I was- what I was thinking-”

“You wanna know what I think?”

She nods, biting her lips that are already started to swell a bit.

“Thinking’s overrated. C’mere,” he says and kisses her again, and this time she allows herself to fall back a bit on the couch, and instantly has the pleasant feel of his weight on top her, and of his tongue brushing past her lips.

It’s slower than the last time. The memories have faded some, but she knows that the last time they did this they went from making out in her kitchen to fucking in her bedroom in record time. Now he kisses her like he’s got all the time in the world.

She can feel the hard press of his dick telling her he’s more than ready to go, and though each nip at her neck or grope of her breast has her getting wetter and wetter, he makes no moves to undress her. She let’s him set a pace that’s some totally unfamiliar mix of tender and passionate. There’s as much heat between them as their ever was, but there’s all this affection added in now. He’s not just some guy anymore. He’s a part of her life- one of the best parts of it- and it makes every kiss and touch that much more powerful because of it.

After what feels like hours- and maybe could be, because time is getting lost on her- she feels him fumbling with the button of her jeans and stiffens. Hop notices.

“Hey,” he says, suddenly, pulling away a bit to look her in the eyes. “Joyce- do you want- I know we started this whole thing kinda suddenly. If you’re not sure-”

“I am,” she says quickly, because she is.

She’s also *terrified*. Because she knows him now, and she likes so much about him, but they’re both fucked up people with fucked up histories, and this thing they’ve had all year has been so nice- and this could fuck it all up.

“Baby, I don’t wanna contradict you, but uh, you don’t *seem* completely sure,” he says. “Not that I’m trying to tell you how you feel or anything but uh- you know there’s no need to rush things-”

“I just- I mean, I guess I’m a little worried. I don’t want to screw with this- this thing we’ve had. Because, Hop- it’s been really nice-”

He looks confused at first, and then hurt in a way that borders on angry.

“Joyce. Are you scared I’m gonna- I don’t know, get what I can out of you and never look back?”

Yes.

She knows it isn’t fair, when he risked so much for her family, when he’s so good to the boys, when he really has been so kind to her all year but...the truth is she’d rather never do this than allow what they’ve had so far to crumble away if he decides he’s not ready for

something more, that he'd rather have a bunch of temporary fucks than try again at something real.

She'd rather not have him tonight than lose him forever if it turns out they cross a line that can't be uncrossed.

She doesn't know how to say it without sounding needy or weak- or hurting him, but she gives it a shot.

"I mean- look, Hop, it's not like I *try* to hear these things, but people in this town talk and I mean- it's no secret you- enjoy the company of women and I just don't know if...if..."

He doesn't take his eyes off her, and she can see him taking in what she's saying. As she talks, he takes her hand in his and squeezes it tight.

"Joyce," he says, when she can't find the words for what she's feeling and trails off. "Do you really think it'd be like it is with those other women? After all this time? Joyce, you're like no woman- no *person* I've ever met. I'm not going anywhere. Not unless you decide to forcibly throw me there for being an unworthy son of a bitch. And I won't lie. It could happen. You'd be in the right to do it. I'm a mess. I'm trying not to be, but it's a work in progress. But- you make me wanna fight that fight. I'm not going anywhere unless you want me to."

She looks at him and finds a sincerity there that can't be faked, a raw honesty that she's not sure she's ever seen in another person. All she'd needed was a word of reassurance from him, to squash down her fears, and he's given her so much more than that. Her heart swells and she throws her arms around him, pulls him close to her

chest, whispers in his ear, “Okay. Okay.”

For a little while, they just stay like that, content to revel in this little calm moment that says this thing they have is *real* . They may not have it all worked out exactly, may not have a map of what’s to come, but there are real ties here binding them to each other, and there’s a comfort and warmth here that she hasn’t felt in longer than she can remember.

Eventually they start up again, with more kissing and touching that leads them back to where they left off.

When he gets her underwear off though, he starts to kiss his way up her legs, slow and teasing. It’s nice- really nice, and getting her so hot- but as he works his way up she also feels this embarrassment coming over her and goes beat red.

“What are you doing?” she rushes out in a whisper, when his mouth is nearly at her cunt.

“Like I said, I’m not going anywhere. We got time to enjoy ourselves,” he says, winking up at her, his chin between her thighs.

“Oh- well- I mean, I am- But, Hop, you don’t have to-” she starts, and after a look of recognition, his face darkens.

“Did that fucking dirtbag never do this for you?” he asks, disgusted.

“What?” she asks, again startled by how blunt he can be. “Well no. Not really- but it’s fine. It ‘s not like it was ever great anyw-”

“He wasn’t doing it right then,” Hop growls. “Remind me to give him a good, hard punch if he ever shows his face around here again. But for now. Lay back, darlin’ and enjoy the ride.”

“Hop,” she says, brushing her hands in his hair, half-prepared to attempt a protest, but then his tongue is on her and she’s not quite sure she knows what to say.

Still, he looks up at her again and says, “Trust me on this. I’ve got a long string of satisfied customers.”

“You’re disgusting,” she says, but soon enough he’s working her clit in a way that makes it hard for her to say or think anything at all. When she comes, panting hard and gasping out his name, he looks far too pleased with himself, and she finds herself enchanted with the expression.

At some point, they unplug the Christmas tree, gather up her discarded clothes and move things into her bedroom. When they fuck again, that too is so much better than the last time.

There’s still a gruffness to him that she likes, a power that’s so appealing and hasn’t gone away, but there’s this connection between them now, this added tenderness that she just wants to sink into and never leave. They come together, gasping, and he kisses the top of

her head and falls against her, shuffling aside a little so as not to crush her with his full weight, but still holding her close.

“I love you, Joyce,” he mumbles after a few minutes. His mouth is resting near her breasts, his arm draped across her belly. It’s muffled, but clear enough that there’s no mistaking it.

It startles her.

She hasn’t heard those words in well over a decade from anyone but her children. “You’re drunk,” she says, yet there’s this smile forming that she can’t suppress or rationalize away. He lifts himself up a little, so he can look down at her with a serious expression.

“As a monkey. Doesn’t make it not true,” he says, his gaze intense. “Besides,” he adds. “I’ve had more sober days this year than I’ve had in the last four. I’ve thought it on just about every one of them and all the other ones too. You’re incredible, Joyce. I mean it. I love you.”

“Oh,” she says, face hot. Her smile widens and he takes that as acceptance and settles back down at her side. The smile is still on her face as she dozes off into a warm sleep.

“Do you want me to go?” he asks in the morning, shaking her slightly into consciousness. It’s a struggle to edge out of her state of warm contentment, but she cracks open an eye and glances at the clock. 8:37. Shit. They were up half the night, in and out of sleep and sex, before finally falling into something deeper, his powerful arms around her, their legs entwined.

It’s getting late. She should say yes.

“No. Stay,” she says, yawning and stretching. “I’ll make breakfast.”

A firm and gentle hand on her shoulder forces her back down.

“You stay. If we’re doing breakfast, I’m the one that’s making it. You’ve cooked me a hundred dinners-”

“A hundred soggy dinners-”

“Hush. A hundred lovely dinners. It’s time I return the favor. Sleep a bit more if you like. I’ll call you when it’s ready.”

He serves up a plate of eggs and bacon that are better than any she’s ever made, then slides into a chair with a plate of his own.

“Listen,” he says, after they’ve made a dent in the delicious spread. “Do you, uh, want me to say something to the boys about this?” He gestures at the pair of them.

She bites her lip. She’s been wondering about that herself. “I don’t know,” she says honestly. “I think- yeah, maybe we should try to ease them into the idea. It should be fine. They think the world of you, Hop, they really do but... Lonnie really did a number on them and- I’m not sure they-”

“Okay,” he says. “Okay. Let’s just enjoy our breakfast. I’ll take off after. Gotta check in at the station at some point anyway. But... maybe we can get a coffee in town or something later and figure it out. Let’s just enjoy this for now though, yeah?”

They do. They spend the whole time making eyes at each other from across the table, simultaneously unable to believe it’s happened and completely thrilled that it did. Then they hear a car coming up the driveway and they stop grinning.

“They’re back,” she half-whispers. “Damn. I thought they’d be over there longer.”

“Uh,” Hop says, rubbing the back of his neck nervously. “Should I-” he starts to stand.

“No. No, sit. You just, uh, came by for breakfast, right? No big deal.”

“No big deal,” he repeats, though he looks unsure.

“Hey, boys,” she calls out when the door opens. They come into the kitchen, looking chilly and a little breathless from the cold. “You’re back early.”

“Yeah,” Will says. “Mike’s aunt and uncle arrived from Iowa. Jonathan said we should head home and give them some family time. But I know it’s really because he think's Mike’s uncle is an asshole.”

“Will!” she chides. “Language!”

Hop laughs. “I actually know the guy. You’re not wrong.”

The boys are looking at him now, and she feels she has to say it.
“Hop’s just- come by for breakfast.”

“Breakfast,” Jonathan repeats, and she tries not to cringe at how dubious he sounds.

“Well, yeah. Since he couldn’t make it yesterday.”

“That’s funny,” Will says. “We didn’t notice any tire tracks.”

“What?” Joyce asks, stiffening.

“It snowed all night,” Jonathan says pointedly.

“No tire tracks,” Will says again.

“Oh-”

“Um-”

“Well-”

They try, but Jonathan and Will just look at each other, shake their heads and say “Liars.”

Hop laughs nervously. “Nothing gets past these two. Looks like we might have a couple of future deputies on our hands.”

Jonathan rolls his eyes. “Well if all criminals are as bad at covering their tracks, or lack of them, as you two, that could be a pretty cushy job.”

They know.

God, how could she fool herself into thinking they wouldn’t?

Mortified, Joyce tries to explain, “Well, boys, you see-”

But Will is already barreling ahead. “Hey, Hop, do you wanna see my new Atari? It’s so cool! I can show you how to play if you want.”

The only real tension in the room had been coming from them, and it shatters like glass at Will’s enthusiasm.

“Sure, kid. Though I warn you, I haven’t the slightest clue about this kind of thing.” He looks pleased and relieved as he starts to get up, but she interrupts.

“Let him finish his coffee first, sweetie.”

“Okay,” Will nods, then turns to his brother. “Jonathan, will you play me until he’s ready?”

“Sure,” Jonathan smiles, and starts to follow him out of the kitchen. Before he leaves though, he turns back and gives them a very knowing look.

When she’s sure they’ve gone, Joyce allows herself to bury her face in her hands. “Wow,” she says, muffled. Hop is chuckling.

“So, that went- surprisingly well,” he says, and she can hear his grin even though she’s still hiding.

She looks up, exhaling hard. “Seriously. Amazingly well.”

"You should have seen your face."

"You should have seen yours."

They laugh a little to get over the rest of their nerves.

Hop finishes his coffee, and heads off to the living room to get schooled on Atari. She does the washing up, and listens to Will’s excited rush of words from the other room that she can’t quite make out. Soon enough, she starts to hear lots of painful “ *Ooohs* ” and “*Dammit*s” from Hop, along with the sounds of explosions and peals of laughter from the boys.

She can't remember the last time she was this happy.

Notes for the Chapter:

The End!!!

Majorly fluffy, I know, but I had to get it out. It's pretty much my ultimate fantasy for these characters, minus the addition of Eleven as their adopted daughter...

Hope you enjoyed it! Let me know what you thought!

Feedback is love!!! <3